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Argentina: Modification of Junta Structure

The army high command reportedly is again debating modification of the formal power structure that has existed since the military ousted President Peron last year. The discussion probably is in large part a reflection of President Videla's cautious leadership style and his apparent willingness to allow discussion of this issue, which leaves the path clear for such "debates." Hardline military elements responsible for reviving the debate are no doubt trying to weaken Videla's effort to consolidate his position within the military regime. The hardliners are also trying to shore up their own positions in the government.

At a meeting in late June, top-ranking generals renewed discussion of the so-called fourth-man theme, which would involve Videla either giving up his position as president or army commander and another individual being named to the vacancy. These officers had earlier agreed that they would not air the subject until late this year. The officers are reportedly divided over the issue--another example of the hardline-moderate confrontation in the army.

Proponents of the fourth-man theme argue that the current administration is indecisive on political issues, and claim that Videla is better suited for the singular, moderating role of president. On the other hand, the high-ranking moderate officers favor retaining the status quo, but seek to achieve cohesiveness in the army by persuading Videla to take action against hardline opponents.

High-ranking officers who do not agree with Videla's policies, particularly the President's recent call for a national dialogue with civilian political groups, will reportedly be expected to resign or be retired. For this reason, the date for army promotion and retirement panels has been moved up to October. Embassy sources report that there will be more discussions of plans for the national dialogue at the next meeting of all generals scheduled in August.

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The idea of a fourth man was vigorously debated earlier this year on the grounds that the current system was workable during the initial period of the junta's takeover and its subsequent consolidation of power, but that it does not give the executive the clear authority to direct longer term policies and plans. Videla refuted the notion that he would give up either of his positions last March, when he stated that the present executive structure would continue through March 1979.

Videla again disavowed consideration of the "fourth man" theme at a press conference last month in Montevideo when he said he saw no need to change the power structure. He hedged his statement somewhat, however, adding that the idea could not be ruled out if circumstances changed.

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The Videla forces appear to be winning the struggle for power between the moderates and hardliners in the army. The President probably would not willingly relinquish his job as army commander before 1979, when by statute he must give up that position. Videla no doubt will continue, however, to compromise on programs in order to win complete acceptance by the military. There also is always the possibility that serious economic or political problems--as has happened before--could interrupt events and require a hurried change in the status quo.

The latest revival of the fourth-man theme stems from the high degree of politicization in the military where disputes and rivalries abound and personal ambitions frequently supercede policy differences. Unless there is more structured and logical pressure from the army concerning a fourth-man, Videla probably will be allowed to continue wearing both hats. The thesis is likely to become a more significant issue in the next year and a half, however, in anticipation of Videla's retirement as army chief.

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